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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationship between students with learning disabilities and delinquency and the implications for the vocational rehabilitation process. Learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency are defined to establish a theoretical and conceptual framework. Four hypotheses that have been proposed to explain why individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to become delinquent are discussed: (1) the school failure hypothesis, which postulates that a learning disability leads to school failure leading to rejection, a negative self-image, and frustration resulting in school dropout and delinquency; (2) the susceptibility hypothesis which postulates that deficits in language, as well as in reading and math skills, tend to establish a pattern of delinquency; (3) the differential treatment hypothesis, that suggests that youth with learning disabilities are treated differently by teachers, police and social workers, increasing the likelihood that arrest and/or adjudication may occur; and (4) the social cognitive ineffectiveness and social maladjustment hypothesis that postulates difficulties in social cognitive problem-solving skills associated with social maladjustment. A review of several studies regarding these models of theory are introduced. Finally, vocational rehabilitation services for adolescents with specific learning disabilities are dicussed. Recommendations are made for vocational rehabilitation practice. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/CR)

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The Relationship Between Learning Disabilities and Delinquency and the Vocational Rehabilitation Process regarding Specific Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between learning disabilities and delinquency and the implications for vocational rehabilitation process. Learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency are defined to establish a theoretical and conceptual framework. Four hypotheses that have been proposed to explain why individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to become delinquent compared to non-learning disabled individuals are discussed. They are labeled as follows: The School Failure Hypothesis, The Susceptibility Hypothesis, The Differential Treatment Hypothesis, and The Alternative Hypothesis - Social Cognitive Ineffectiveness and Social Maladjustment Hypothesis. A review of several studies regarding these models of theory are introduced. Finally, a discussion of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services for eligible adolescents with primary disabilities of specific learning disabilities (SLD) is introduced.

The Relationship Between Learning Disabilities and Delinquency and the Vocational Rehabilitation Process regarding Specific Learning Disabilities

The relationship between learning disabilities and delinquency has been a focus of considerable discussion and controversy (Meltzer, Roditi, & Fenton, 1986). Since the mid 1970s much research has shown that a significant proportion of persons who commit delinquent acts are also found to have learning disabilities (For a review, see Brier, 1989). Studies have shown a high correlation between learning disabilities and school failure, as well as a high correlation between delinquency and school failure (Ball, Parker, & Saunders, 1982).

School failure has always been a concern of school administrators. As early as 1933, school maladjustment and frustration were found to be at the root of delinquent actions (Grande, 1988). Increased interest in the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency caused action form The National Institute for Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention to compile data to determine the incidence and prevalence of learning disabilities in adjudicated and nonadjudicated delinquents (Grande, 1988). The research results led to the conclusion that there was a link between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency (Grande, 1988).

A definition of learning disabilities as formulated by the United States Department of Education is defined as "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations" (United States Department of Education, 1985). The characteristics associated with a learning disability are low achievement in reading, writing, or math, as well as a reduced mental

capability to solve problems in a rational manner (Larson, 1988).

A juvenile delinquent is a youth who is "under the age of 18 and has been brought before the juvenile courts for a criminal or a status offense" (Jacobsen, 1983, p. 65). A juvenile delinquent is often three to five years behind grade placement (Ball, Parker, & Suanders, 1982). The onset of delinquency is displayed as early as age three and continues throughout school. The delinquent child will tend to display characteristics of aggressiveness, which leads to conduct problems. Because of rejection at school by both peers and teachers, they are more often ignored or criticized which leads to self criticism and poor achievement (Brier, 1989).

Prevalence rates of learning disabilities in delinquent populations have varied widely from 12% to 70% or greater (Brier, 1989). These prevalence rates were derived from different assessment criteria, techniques, and instruments which explains the extreme variation. Due to the varying rates, The National Center for State Courts stated, "36% of incarcerated juveniles were found to have a learning disability, and youngsters with learning disabilities were found to be more than twice as likely to commit a delinquent offense than their non-learning disabled counterparts; that is 9 out of 100 youngsters with learning disabilities were found to have committed a delinquent act, compared to 4 out of 100 non-learning disabled youngsters from comparable backgrounds" (Brier, 1989, p. 546). Such variables as socioeconomic status, family size, and family intactness were held constant.

A study by Texas and Orem (1985) on the learning disabled adult offender confirmed that learning disabilities were more prevalent among incarcerated adults than the general public. Based upon achievement tests given to incarcerated adult offenders, the results revealed 57% of the sample were designated as learning disabled (Texas & Orem, 1985). When auditory and

visual skills were measured, the results showed that 100% of the incarcerated adults were labeled learning disabled.

Four hypotheses have been proposed to explain why individuals with learning disabilities are more likely to become delinquent when compared to non-learning disabled individuals (Brier, 1989; Larson, 1988). The four hypotheses are labeled as The School Failure Hypothesis, The Susceptibility Hypothesis, The Differential Treatment Hypothesis, and The Alternative Hypothesis - Social Cognitive Ineffectiveness and Social Maladjustment.

The School Failure Hypothesis

This hypothesis postulates that a learning disability leads to school failure, which leads to rejection, a negative self image, and frustration, and this results in school dropout and delinquency (Larson, 1988). The School Failure Hypothesis has been supported by school records, psychological tests, and observation. However, school dropout does not increase delinquency, rather studies have shown it decreases delinquent acts once the child has removed himself or herself from the school setting and he or she feels less frustrated and no longer criticized by his or her peers or teachers (Jacobsen, 1983). Therefore, Larson (1988) suggests that "school failure would be an effect and not a cause of social misbehavior and delinquency" (Larson, 1988, p. 358).

Early research in the field of learning disabilities was directed toward the cognitive and motor functions of the learning disabled child. Recent research has focused more on the affective and motivational aspects of learning disabilities, such as studies that have explored the relationship of psychosocial traits commonly observed in adolescents with learning disabilities. Pickar and Tori (1986) developed a study using Erikson's psychosocial development theory

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which supported the school failure hypothesis. Erikson's psychosocial development theory is based on eight developmental stages in the life cycle in which a resolution is necessary at each stage in order to advance to the next stage. Each stage involves a developmental crisis, and one's success in coping with the crisis is seen as affecting one's general development before and after the stage. In Erikson's fourth stage, industry versus inferiority, an adequate feeling of competence, the ability to do well, and to be effective in social interactions with the environment are essential tasks to stage resolution. Thus, a sense of industry, or the enthusiasm to engage in productive work is established. Learning disabled adolescents often develop a sense of inferiority, failure, and incompetence. Therefore, the youth who turn to delinquency tend to lack confidence in both their social and occupational skills. Pickar and Tori's 1986 study focused on Erikson's fourth stage.

Thirty-nine (39) learning disabled and 47 non-learning disabled adolescents were included in the study. The mean age was 16. The researchers predicted that the learning disabled adolescents would have more difficulty with resolution of Stage 4, industry versus inferiority, than the non-learning disabled adolescents. They also predicted that the learning disabled adolescents would perform more delinquent acts than their non-learning disabled peers. The learning disabled children obtained lower scores on the intellectual and school status variable of the Piers-Harris Children's Self Concept Scale and reported feeling less popular than the non-learning disabled children. Learning disabled children were found to have difficulty forming friendships and also in perceiving body language and feelings of others. The results showed, that due to school failure (usually by being behind almost two years in school) learning disabled adolescents were unable to successfully resolve Erikson's fourth stage. This was attributed to

their inability to develop a sense of industry and competence. However, there was no significant difference in the overall self-concept among the learning disabled adolescent group than that of the non-learning disabled adolescent group. Evidence from this study indicates that poor social adjustment, including delinquency, related to the inability to resolve Erikson's fourth stage, may account for school failure or dropout in learning disabled youth.

The Susceptibility Hypothesis

According to the susceptibility theory, deficits in language, as well as reading and math skills tend to establish a pattern of delinquency. An individual with deficits in language often displays inadequacies in problem solving and measuring skills. In summary, deficits in language and social skills combined with impulsivity and inattention seem to be key elements of the learning disabled child being susceptible to juvenile delinquency (Brier, 1989).

Impulsivity and inattention are characteristics of learning disabled children. These characteristics are also common to children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). About one-half of children with ADHD are found to have learning disabilities (Brier, 1989). The longer the antisocial and aggressive behavior occurs, the more prone delinquent behavior is to occur. The duration of the disruptive behavior and presence of the aggressivity appear to further increase the delinquency risk (Brier, 1989).

Waldie and Spreen (1993) discuss the relationship between learning disabilities and persisting delinquency through a literature review, as well as a description of a research study performed. The findings of the study indicate recidivism of delinquency in juveniles with learning disabilities and that learning disabled students are more prone to delinquent tendencies than students without learning disabilities. The theoretical framework describes two models of

theory: school failure and susceptibility.

The susceptibility hypothesis states that youth with learning disabilities are more prone to have delinquent tendencies than non-learning disabled. The sample consisted of 65 students from the Vancouver area for both the first and second interviews. The mean age at the first interview was 18 and 25 at the second interview. The presence of learning disabilities was measured by school records, achievement testing, and parent reports (Waldie and Spreen, 1993). All students had received testing and counseling services for their learning disabilities from The University of Victoria Neuropsychology.

The main question asked of the students, "Have you come to the attention of the police?" was important to form the sample and determine the two groups, persisting versus nonpersisting. The sixty-five students admitted to police contact at the first interview. In the second interview, they were divided into two groups labeled "persisting" versus "nonpersisting" based on a history of delinquency. Those in the "persisting" group admitted to continued police contact in reference to delinquent acts since the first interview. Those in the "nonpersisting" group stated they had no further contact with police in reference to delinquent acts.

The school failure theory purports that those students with learning disabilities produce academic failure, which leads to a negative self image, which in turn results in school dropout and delinquent behavior (Wadie and Spreen, 1993). In this study, poor academic achievement was not shown to contribute to delinquency. The "persisting" group was not higher than the "nonpersisting" group in academic failure because there was no significant difference found between the two groups. However, the recividists received extra attention and instruction which may decrease delinquency and increase academic skills.

The results showed that 62% of the subjects who were delinquent at age 18.9 had continued police contact or delinquency into the mid 20s. The findings support the susceptibility theory, but findings for the school failure theory are weak. Therefore, learning disabilities may be linked to poor judgment and impulsiveness which could lead to increased susceptibility to delinquent behavior (Waldie and Spreen, 1993).

The Differential Treatment Hypothesis

The Differential Treatment Hypothesis suggests that youth with learning disabilities are treated differently by teachers, police, and social workers (Larson, 1988). This differential treatment often increases the likelihood that arrest and/or adjudication may occur among learning disabled students.

Brier (1989) raises three questions in reference to this hypothesis. They are as follows:

1. Are individuals who are learning disabled more likely to be picked up by the police than non-learning disabled individuals for comparable levels of delinquent activity?
2. Are individuals with LD who are charged with a violation at greater risk of adjudication than non-learning disabled individuals?
3. Are individuals who are learning disabled more likely to receive a severe disposition from juvenile court than non-learning disabled youngsters? (Brier, 1989, p. 549)

The results of a study sponsored by the National Center for State Courts, using cross-sectional and longitudinal methodology, answered two of the three questions affirmatively (Brier, 1989). Youth who were "learning disabled were about 200% more likely to be arrested for committing offenses of equal frequency and seriousness than their non-learning disabled counterparts, and had a higher probability of being officially adjudicated delinquent than did non-

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learning disabled peers" (Brier, 1989, p. 550). There was no evidence to support the third question (Brier, 1989).

A study by Pearl and Bryan (1994) examined adolescents and how they respond after being caught in misconduct in order to determine whether students with learning disabilities differ from non-learning disabled students on their beliefs regarding apprehension. A total of 88 students with learning disabilities (62 male, 26 female) and 84 nondisabled students (45 male, 39 female) comprised the sample. They were interviewed about ten scenarios regarding being caught by authorities and their reaction to the situation. The results indicated that students with learning disabilities were more likely to escape or avoid the confrontation than non-learning disabled persons. The differences between learning disabled and non-learning disabled adolescents were not significant, however.

The cause for this differential treatment appears to be linked with the learning disabled child's lack of ability to solve problems and poor social skills. Research based on self reports indicate that learning disabled individuals lack skills to respond and act appropriately to negative situations (Brier, 1989). Learning disabled adolescents are more prone to try to avoid or escape a situation rather than to admit to the wrongdoing. In addition, their reaction to teachers or police officers may be aggressive, and impulsive, rather than rational and complacent (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Conger, 1991).

The Alternative Hypothesis:

Social Cognitive Ineffectiveness and Social Maladjustment

The social cognitive ineffectiveness and social maladjustment hypothesis suggest that difficulties in social cognitive problem-solving skills are associated with social maladjustment

and that learning disabled youth and delinquent youth are more likely to exhibit these skills than their non-learning disabled peers. One approach to develop the alternative hypothesis is to identify a specific skill, social cognitive problem-solving, as related to social adjustment for which evidence exists that "(a) differences or deficits in the skill are empirically associated with delinquent behavior, (b) socially maladjusted LD youth are highly likely to be ineffective in the skill, and (c) the skill identified must be shown to mediate various behavioral responses across different social situations" (Larson, 1988, p. 359). Larson (1988) defined social cognitive problem-solving skills as generalized skills applicable to a variety of situations and potentially useful for increasing generalization of socially competent responses.

Two controversial issues in the field of learning disabilities that are related to the alternative hypothesis are (a) whether the learning disabled adolescent exhibit social skills that are lower than the non-learning disabled adolescent and (b) whether this lack of skills has a negative impact on the learning disabled adolescent (Schumaker, Hazel, Sherman, & Sheldon, 1982).

A study by Schumaker, Hazel, Sherman, & Sheldon (1982) was designed to compare the social skills of learning disabled persons versus the social skills of non-learning disabled persons and juvenile delinquents. Social skills were tested through role playing situations in ten occupational situations, which included participating in a job interview, accepting criticism from an employer, providing constructive criticism to a co-worker, and explaining a problem to a supervisor.

The results showed learning disabled persons tested lower on 7 of the 8 general social skills which were accepting negative feedback, conversation, following instruction, giving

negative feedback, negotiation, problem solving, and resisting peer pressure. The learning disabled youth scored significantly better than the non-learning disabled youth on only one social skill - resisting peer pressure. The learning disabled youth were better at resisting peer pressure than the non-learning disabled youth, due to their lack of perception of the importance of the influence of other peers regarding their actions. The results portray a need for social skills training. The learning disabled youth reported that they were less involved in extracurricular activities and formally organized activities, and were less satisfied with their contacts with parents and relatives. In addition, because of their social maladjustment, the learning disabled adolescents were twice as likely to be ignored or to receive punishment (Schumaker, Hazel, Sherman, Sheldon, 1982).

Rehabilitation Services and Learning Disabilities

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services became available to eligible persons with primary disabilities of specific learning disabilities (SLD) in 1981 (Dowdy, 1992). Since 1981, this group has been the fastest growing disability group in the federal agency. However, the percentage of persons with specific learning disabilities served by VR is significantly smaller than those receiving special education services. While it is not expected that all persons with specific learning disabilities will become VR clients, it is important to identify an individual with a learning disability through performing diagnostic procedures and determining eligibility for state rehabilitation agency services.

In order to begin the identification process, an operational definition of SLD should be studied. The State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in the RSA Program Policy Directive, RSA-PPD-85-7 dated March 5,

1985, defined SLD as "a disorder in one or more of the central nervous system processes involved in perceiving, understanding, and/or using concept through verbal (spoken or written) language or nonverbal means. This disorder manifests itself with a deficit in one or more of the following areas: attention, reasoning, processing, memory, communication, reading, writing, spelling, calculation, coordination, social competence, and emotional maturity." (Dowdy, 1992, p. 52). Thus, this definition confirms that a SLD can be considered a central nervous system (CNS) disorder involved with the processing of information. Further, Cruickshank (1984) provides a historically and neurologically correct definition of a learning disability which deals with perceptual processing deficits by stating that "learning disabilities are problems in the acquisition of developmental skills, academic achievement, social adjustment, and secondarily emotional growth and development, which are the result of perceptual and linguistic processing deficits." (Cruickshank, 1984, p. 15).

The rehabilitation process involves six steps. They are referral, evaluation, eligibility, program planning, service delivery, and employment. Referrals will be made by school counselors, parents, or teachers from both private and public school systems. Several strategies should be used by the counselor to evaluate an individual to identify the potential of a learning disability. Through a preliminary screening, these strategies may include gathering information regarding a client's background through file review and diagnostic interviewing, behavioral observation and the review of school records (Hursh, 1984). These strategies are necessary to determine an accurate referral for a more thorough diagnosis by a qualified specialist.

Because the state-federal vocational rehabilitation (VR) Program is an eligibility program rather than an entitlement program, not all persons with SLD will be provided rehabilitation

services. In 1980, SLD was recognized as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (Mulkey, Kopp, & Miller, 1984). Based on this recognition RSA initiated action to recognize SLD to be considered for services in the state-federal vocational rehabilitation program. For a student in secondary schools to be eligible for services, he or she must be at least sixteen years of age and enrolled fulltime in high school.

The eligibility criteria for an individual with SLD is the same for people with other disabilities. The following criteria must be met: "1. There must be a physical or mental disorder; 2. There must be a substantial handicap to employment resulting from the disorder; and 3. There must be a reasonable expectation that vocational rehabilitation services will benefit the individual in terms of employability" (Mulkey, Kopp, & Miller, 1984, p. 53). Once an adolescent has been determined eligible for services, an Individualized Written Rehabilitation Program (IWRP) is developed with both the client and the rehabilitation counselor's input, to make a decision on a vocational goal. The vocational goal can range from pursuing postsecondary education such as college or vocational-technical school or to pursue employment, whether it is fulltime or parttime. The IWRP is flexible, however, with a certain amount of structure, leaving little room for distraction for the adolescent. The services provided are highly individualized based on the adolescent's vocational goals and the IWRP.

Implications for Vocational Rehabilitation Practice

The behaviors that lend themselves to increased involvement in delinquent behaviors seem to be behaviors that would create substantial barriers to employment. A SLD Characteristics Checklist (Dowdy, 1992) has been developed to take each of the twelve areas

described in the 1985 RSA definition of learning disabilities to determine observable behaviors at the initial intake interview. They include the following: "1. Does not seem to listen to what is being said (Attention); 2. Interrupts inappropriately (Attention); 3. Has difficulty remaining seated/fidgets - feels restless (Attention); 4. Has delayed verbal responses (Reasoning/Processing); 5. Has time management difficulties (Reasoning/Processing); 6. Has difficulty answering questions regarding personal history (Memory); 7. Uses eye contact ineffectively (Interpersonal Skills/Emotional Maturity); 8. Exhibitis signs of poor self-confidence (Interpersonal Skills/Emotional Maturity); and 9. Has difficulty explaining things coherently (Communication)" (Dowdy, 1992, p. 53).

Summary and Recommendations

Because SLD is a fairly new disability group designated for eligibility under the VR program, VR counselors' attitudes were somewhat negative initially due to their inadequate knowledge and misinformation regarding this disability (Dowdy, 1992). However, this negativity is being replaced with a more positive attitude due to the increase in specialized training in SLD, as well as recent priority for funding programs for persons with SLD. Although not everyone who has a learning disability will be eligible for services in the VR program, it is imperative that through the proper identification of a SLD and diagnostic testing, those persons meeting the eligibility requirements will benefit from these services and will be successful in increasing their employability.

Further research is needed to demonstrate a substantial causal relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquents (Perlmutter, 1987). Pickar (1986, p. 43) states,

"considerable controversy exists as to whether learning disabilities should be considered a causal factor in delinquency. It has been surmised that learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency have been linked to each other because when a juvenile delinquent is studied, they have been diagnosed as learning disabled." More research is needed in non adjudicated adolescents as compared to adjudicated adolescents and their relationship with learning disabilities.

Because studies show that a relationship does exist between learning disabilities and delinquency, this relationship should be carefully monitored by the family, the school, the rehabilitation counselor, and the juvenile justice system. Through early identification and detection, the delinquency cycle can be broken for the learning disabled adolescent (Brier, 1989).

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